

Testimony of Blake Hurst
Missouri Farmer
Vice President, Missouri Farm Bureau

Sometimes, when the sun is shining on the combine windshield, and things are running like they're supposed to, and a 200 bushel corn crop is coming out of the fields one acre at a time, sometimes farming can be the best life I can imagine. And sometimes, when it doesn't rain, or it rains too much, or the combine breaks down, or when prices are too low, and diesel is three dollars a gallon, sometimes farming is a hard and challenging life. And almost always, we farmers forget to thank the taxpayers and their representatives who spend their hard earned dollars supporting agriculture through farm programs. We've come to depend upon those programs, and we're grateful for the concern and interest shown by our fellow citizens. Without that support, a hard and challenging life would be impossible for many of us.

Perhaps I can best describe farming by using the words of two poets. One who is a wheat and hog farmer from just north of here, and one who lives just west of here. First, Timothy Murphy: I fear for my spring wheat./ Will it grow red and tall/ or head our small?/ Will it succumb to heat,/ drought and dust or rot and rust?/ Will it be flooded out / or flattened by the hail?/ I am beset/ with doubt and debt/ Surely the wheat will fail.

Poet Laureate Ted Kooster sums up farm economics in a paragraph. "That's farming: huge surpluses of grain one year, with low prices because of the abundance; then, the following year, a poor crop resulting in higher prices per bushel. And so it goes, year in and year out, supply and demand, demand and supply. Nearly every person who farms in our area has a day job...and farms in the evenings and on the weekends. But it's still a good life. "Not even a chicken digs for nothing."

To the weather and disease that Timothy Murphy worries about, and the low prices that Ted Kooster describes, we've experienced a series of other problems, many of our own making. I started by thanking the taxpayer for the help he has sent my way, and he's truly been generous. But I just closed the books on the past year, and I can tell you that those generous farm payments don't cover even the increase in energy costs on my farm. During harvest, we suffered from an increase in energy costs of nearly \$500 a day: while applying anhydrous fertilizer later in the fall, we were hammered by fertilizer costs nearly 3 times higher than they were a couple of years ago. Just the increase in prices for nitrogen fertilizer will cost my family nearly \$50,000 this year. We need to quit using natural gas for the things that coal and nuclear power can do, and we need to find and use natural gas where it exists in our own country. We've made great strides in producing energy from the sun by producing ethanol, and we'll soon be doing the same with biodiesel. Our county in Northwest Missouri will soon be the home for several wind power farms. But these alternatives, as important as they are, won't replace fossil fuels anytime soon, so we must produce more energy from traditional sources. To put it as bluntly as I can, an energy policy that results in lower costs to my farm will do more to ensure my success than any farm policy changes that I can envision.

Added to our energy woes is the challenge we face from decisions made in Washington. Barely a mile from where we sit is the Missouri River. Along the river lies some of the best farm ground in the world, and the homes and businesses of thousands of Midwesterners. People whose homes, farms, and very lives are at risk because of changes in river management made to help, or at least that's the theory, two birds and a fish. The science for that decision is shaky, and the folks along the river unwilling guinea pigs in a grand experiment. To add insult to injury, our crop insurance may not cover the results of what will be a man made disaster. It's never too late to replace foolishness with common sense. Someone once said that "wisdom is easy to carry but hard to load." I sincerely hope that the wisdom to change this decision is found before we suffer a man made disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina.

The past few years have been good to agriculture. Despite the concerns I've listed here, farm income has been strong, and the 2002 farm bill a success. We are now engaged in the end game of decade long negotiations on a World Trade Agreement. We should extend the 2002 farm bill until a trade agreement helpful to agriculture is in place. We are faced with trading partners that don't play fair, and who are, so far, unwilling to replace their subsidies with a more free world wide market in agriculture products. We can secure an agreement that will lessen the need for agricultural subsidies worldwide, and hundreds of millions of people will benefit. But we can't do that without the leverage that our present programs provide. And along with protecting our negotiating position, the new farm bill needs to continue to provide protection against the vicissitudes of the market and the weather. Because Timothy Murphy had it right. Eventually, we farmers always face drought and dust, and rot and rust.

Blake Hurst
Tarkio, Missouri
Missouri Farm Bureau Vice-President

Blake Hurst graduated from the University of Missouri in 1978 and began farming with his father and grandfather. Now in partnership with his father, two brothers, and nephew, the Hursts farm 4500 acres. He and his wife, Julie, started a wholesale greenhouse business in 1980, that has grown to two acres under cover and another two acres of outside production, supplying bedding plants to customers in four states and seasonally employing 12 people.

Blake is vice president of Missouri Farm Bureau and a contributing writer to the American Enterprise Magazine. The Hurst's have 3 children. Their oldest daughter and her husband are partners in the greenhouse business. The Hurst family was chosen as the 2005 American Royal Farm Family

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: BLAKE HURST
Address: 502 Spruce
Telephone: 660-984-5443
Organization you represent (if any): Missouri Farm Bureau

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: Blake Hurst

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.

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